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RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the United Towns Agency for North-South Cooperation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[26 March 1997]

1. Always, and no doubt throughout the world, whatever the country, minorities have suffered injustice in flagrant, repeated violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. This statement will not deal with the minorities currently before the public eye. Instead it will focus on the minorities who are rarely if ever spoken of, and often then in damning terms.

3. Each nation has an identity represented by a culture, a language, a religion and an ethnic group. However, in every nation there is one constituent that belongs but is set apart by ethnic group, language or culture. World history shows that a "dominant - dominated" relationship is quickly established. This would be less of a misfortune if the minority enjoyed all their human rights. But that, in fact, is not the case, for in each nation, the minority tends to be neglected, marginalized, kept apart from the life of the nation.

4. At the threshold of the twenty-first century, such a state of affairs is intolerable. To our great regret, we cannot but be aware that a great many States, including the most industrialized and the richest, and even States that claim to be the cradles and most ardent defenders of democracy, follow policies of exclusion. This is how the "shanty towns and ghettos" of our great metropolises are filled. All official reports by institutional services go to show that the people in them are "marginal, delinquent and maladjusted", unsuited to work, unsuited to decent housing, unsuited to participating in the life of the nation. Thus the authors justify the policy of excluding these people, while attempting to explain that the situation is due to the ethnic or religious origins of groups often in the minority in the countries concerned.

5. However, we cannot accept this as an excuse for the lack of interest States show these minority groups. It is too easy to say that 70 per cent of the Puerto Ricans in New York are illiterate, or that the gypsies in France are also illiterate and unsuited to work. We will not list all such instances, but every nation is confronted with this type of problem.

6. Those of us who, in the course of our work, have had the advantage - even the honour - of seeing what life is like in these "ghettos", have been astounded at the poverty - well below the bare minimum - that children, women, men, entire families, are living in, all of them resigned to this precarious state but displaying immense human richness and warmth. We have also discovered that they have a language and a culture.

7. So why are these men, women, children and families excluded from the life of the nation? Simply because of a phenomenon akin to racism, caused by fear and ignorance. Sometimes it is easier to admit failure than to look for the real cause of a problem.

8. All we have to do is respect these people's right to develop their identity, and this would generate a new cultural richness beneficial to the nation. Ultimately, the situation is due to the lack of institutional representation for these minority groups. Allowing them to be represented would enable national and international institutions to learn about their problems and discover what they want and what they have to propose.

9. We therefore feel it is important for the international community to promote the establishment of such a representative institution through the Commission on Human Rights.